

Council: 26 March 2024 - written responses to questions

Item 6: Leader's statement

1. Question from Councillor Nick Clarke

Councillor Nick Clarke asked whether the Leader was in a position to update on the costs, timescales and proposition for the Bury St Edmunds Leisure Centre.

Response from Councillors Cliff Waterman, Leader of the Council and Ian Shipp, Portfolio Holder for Leisure:

We have been working closely with officers to ensure there is no unnecessary delay to works at Bury Leisure Centre, whilst ensuring that the funds allocated (£6.2m) are spent to good effect. To that end, officers have reviewed the essential maintenance cost estimate that was prepared in November 2022 and updated the requirements having regard to items that have changed, repairs that have already been undertaken and equipment that is no longer in use or needed. (Note some essential urgent repairs have already commenced). Following that robust review I have asked officers to come back to me in May with a proposal for minor refurbishments to the leisure centre that will both address the maintenance legacy but will also enhance the user experience, and address the running costs of the centre. We are of course disappointed that the much heralded Government Swimming Pool fund was four times oversubscribed so improvements that fund will deliver are limited to £35,000 for filtration upgrades.

Cabinet will be reviewing proposals for the remainder of the works in May, and will be engaging with service users and ward Councillors to hear more about their concerns and views before market-testing and finalising the action plan in October. Last month members of Cabinet visited the centre to see the extent of the works needed and indeed some of the positive aspects of the centre. We have also had regard to the findings of the O&S Abbeycroft leisure review that was completed last year.

2. Question from Councillor Joe Mason

Councillor Joe Mason asked what measures and initiatives were being put in place for local residents, businesses and market traders that would encourage greater footfall in Haverhill High Street.

As part of this, Councillor Mason referred to some car parking charges being simplified or being abolished in Bury St Edmunds and other smaller towns in the district; however there had been no changes made to car parking charges in Haverhill. He asked whether ideas such as a 'free for the first hour' initiative throughout the week could be introduced to encourage shoppers into the town. Councillor Mason felt that the 'free from three' on a Friday initiative was no longer an incentive.

Response from Councillors Indy Wijenayaka, Portfolio Holder for Growth and Councillor David Taylor, Portfolio Holder for Operations, regarding the car parking element of the question:

There are several initiatives being progressed that aim to increase footfall in Haverhill town centre/High Street.

The first is the £2 million investment in Provincial House which will help West Suffolk College Personal and Professional Learning Centre relocate from its current base at Unity School Partnership building into the town centre. This builds upon the Council's decision to purchase the building back in 2019 in an attempt to retain Axa Insurance in the town centre. Studies have shown that footfall in town centres is supported by people working in town centre offices and also having a reason to visit the High Street, such as to attend training/education.

The second key initiative relates to the provisions market and the specialist markets being developed for Haverhill and other West Suffolk towns. It can be seen from car parking data that footfall in the town centre is increased on market days and when the town centre hosts special events.

In the last quarter we have run initiatives for new traders allowing them free market pitches for 12 weeks. We have seen a positive increase in traders on Haverhill market due to this initiative. We continue to monitor whether these traders decide to keep their pitches once the 12 week period is over.

The Haverhill Makers Markets resumed in March and in the last year we have seen the numbers of traders increase from 10-15 to 20-30 traders. The Makers Markets are held as part of the provisions markets once a month on the Saturday which helps to provide additional stalls and interest.

West Suffolk Council provides several gazebos and the infrastructure for new traders who use the market days as a test bed for the products and services they wish to sell.

Last year we hosted the local heat of the Young Trader Market (part of the NMTF national competition) in Haverhill. We have seen five young traders from Haverhill progress from the youth market to become regular traders at the Makers Markets. This year it is the turn of Newmarket to host this event.

This year has seen additional investment in all of the market towns with regard to signage. We attracted external funding to enable us to purchase repurposed Royal Mail bikes which we use as signs highlighting the local market in each town. Each bike explains when the local markets are held and includes a QR code for people to be able to access the Markets website that provides greater detail – including when the specialist markets are held. We have additional funding for signage that we will use to supplement the bike signs.

We are working to develop the Markets Website further. It will have a section for market traders to add the profile of their business and further details.

In addition, we work with Haverhill Town Council on their town centre events for example Armed Forces Day, Christmas lights switch on, Suffolk Day etc.

Following on from the Town Tours undertaken by the Leader and Cabinet, we are developing further initiatives and details of these will be released at the appropriate times.

With regard to parking charges, we have not increased parking tariffs in Haverhill since 2021. Despite operational costs increasing, we have retained a 50p per hour parking tariff for short stay parking (which compares favourably with nearby towns), provide a 'free from three offer' once per week and continue to provide free parking after 6pm. We have seen growth in parking demand over the past three years and we will continue to monitor on regular basis, as is the case for all of our towns.

3. Question from Councillor Sarah Pugh

Councillor Sarah Pugh asked whether smaller 'pots' of funding could be made available by West Suffolk Council to support the survival of small, independent businesses.

Response from Councillor Indy Wijenayaka, Portfolio Holder for Growth:

The current Suffolk Small Business Grant which was developed as part of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) Business Support intervention (E30) currently offers match funded grants of £5,000-£10,000 to businesses in any sector looking to grow, innovate or diversify. Lower levels of intervention do not currently fit within the scope of the scheme which is around growing, becoming more productive, encouraging innovation, and contributing to the creation of new jobs.

Officers will reach out to Councillor Pugh to understand what the scale of need is for grants locally to help shape any future intervention and/or work with the business or businesses identified to seek other appropriate funding.

Officers are actively looking at ways to help small and micro businesses with grants, as requested by Councillor Pugh, however we also need to balance this with an efficient process that enables officers to be effective in managing these types of requests.